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ABSTRACT

A discussion of the status of German second language instruction, particularly at the postsecondary level, focuses on the role of standards, curriculum, and testing in increasing interest in and support for foreign language education. A substantial decline in German enrollments in the first half of the 1990s is noted, and possible reasons are considered. It is argued that a concerted effort to adapt the offerings and format of German instruction to current foreign language methodology and standards must be made and maintained. Recent discussions of the need for national standards in second language instruction are reviewed, and implications for curriculum design and articulation across educational levels and for development of new testing approaches are explored. It is concluded that the tools for improvement in standards, curriculum, and testing are available, and it is up to the profession to continue the progress that has already begun. (MSE)

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German Studies: A Paradigm of Change

Comments on Standards, Curriculum, and Testing

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The following is an assessment of the status quo based on many easily available sources in our profession. In the scholarly literature, and even in the mass media when it on rare occasions deals with educational or specifically with foreign language topics, there are three terms which appear again and again: *standards, curriculum* and *testing*. I believe herein lie the kernels for progress and the promising signals toward a more solid role for the humanities, and specifically for foreign languages in the future curriculum of post-secondary education, if not for all of education. Of course, I am realistic enough to understand that the study of foreign languages, or the humanities in general, won't become a national concern overnight. Nevertheless there are a number of things which have happened in the recent months, and some of them can be interpreted as the advent of a minor renaissance. However, no progress comes easily and it will require a great deal of more hard work and collaboration between the various participants in the different foreign languages to solidify our position, e.g. when diverse curriculum or personnel decisions are made in humanities colleges all across this country. Furthermore, public awareness needs to be raised to even higher levels, and the promotion of second language education needs to become a top priority for every educator in the field of foreign languages.

There is a plethora of German programs in American colleges and universities, many of which have been met with remarkable success. But they all have been

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experiencing an alarming phenomenon in the first half of the nineties: a very high rate of attrition. According to recent statistics published by the MLA, foreign language enrollments in fall 1990 and fall 1995, from a survey of 2772 two- and four-year colleges have shown huge declines. Specifically, German has lost ground at the rate of 27.8%, or to state it even more graphically, while in the fall of 1990 German had 133,348 enrollments it fell below the 100,000 mark in the fall of 1995 to 96,263 enrollments. Registrations in French and Russian were also dramatically lower in 1995 than in 1990. Overall, registrations in undergraduate courses at four-year institutions were 6% lower in 1995 than in 1990, while registrations at two-year institutions, which accounted for one-fifth of the total, were 4% higher for the same period. This resulted in downsizing of departments, incorporation of departments into language centers or even the outright elimination of departments. As a corollary to the heavy focus on Spanish, two-year colleges offer courses in fewer languages than four-year institutions. (1) Yet the first raw data for 1996 seem to suggest that the worst is behind us; as a matter of fact, foreign language enrollments are rising significantly in a number of states, whereas overall increases are averaging about 5%. (2)

Finding causes for the declines in the first half of this decade is a difficult and unreliable undertaking. But Elizabeth B. Welles' thesis strikes me as very unconvincing when she speculates, that "[...,] in 1989, when the Berlin Wall came down, enrollments in German went up, but for some reason, perhaps disappointed expectations about unified Germany's immediate prosperity, the increases were not sustained." (3) It is safe to say that the average American college student is largely unaware of the economic and social difficulties which the unification has brought about. It is more likely that reasons will be found in the domestic arena of the United States; for example, the high decrease in traditionally strong languages like French, German, and Russia probably can be attributed to the ever increasing social, political and economic importance of the Spanish-speaking population in this country.

Nevertheless, looking at these figures, it cannot be lost on our profession that a concerted effort has to be made, and fortunately is being made, to adapt the offerings and format of German instruction to curricular and methodological prerequisites of current educational goals and practices in this country. The philosophy of present-day language instruction has changed in many fundamental ways in recent times, as is well portrayed in Claire Kramsch's essay "Wem gehört die deutsche Sprache?" (4) She says, "Die bis jetzt unangefochtene Autorität des monolingualen *native speakers* ist in letzter Zeit unter dem Einfluß von postmodernen und postkolonialistischen Trends in Frage gestellt worden. **Es gilt jetzt, Lernende als Grenzüberschreiter zwischen den Kulturen zu sehen, als bilinguale/bikulturelle Menschen, die durch das Erlernen einer neuen Sprache ein neues Verhältnis zu sich selbst und zu anderen finden können.** Die deutsche Sprache ist weder ein Geburtsrecht noch ein erworbenes Recht, sondern das Recht, sich kultureller Grenzen bewußt zu werden." (bold face by wvs)

This statement shall serve as the focal point for the subsequent comments because it shows how the objective of learning a second language, even though critical from a number of perspectives, is fundamentally a process of learning and absorbing of a new culture. The learner of a second language resides between the cultures and her/his aim is to reach a new and better understanding of herself/himself and of others.

How can this be accomplished? Let us first look at the issue of *standards* as one of the fundamental tools to accomplish Kramsch's stated objectives. *The Standards for Foreign Language Learning: Preparing for the 21st Century* are now, after several years of hard work, in print and even available on the ACTFL page on the World Wide Web. (5) In the foreseeable future, national standards, not just state standards, in cooperation with the respective professional organizations like ACTFL, AATF, AATG, and AATSP will be implemented and for the first time a better coordinated and unified curriculum for German

K-16 will be more than just a project. (6) At the core of the document are the five C's as *Standards for Learning German:*

Communication - Communicate in **German**

Cultures - Gain knowledge and understanding of the **German-Speaking World**

Connections - Connect with Other disciplines and Acquire Information

Comparisons - Develop Insight into the Nature of Language and Culture

Communities - Participate in Multilingual Communities at Home and Around the World

The integration of the five C's into the German language curriculum starts with the premise that culture, in its many semantic interpretations, but primarily as the development or improvement of the mind by education or training, is the underlying factor in language learning. Outcomes, as a result of this emphasis on culture, are no longer assessed, as has traditionally been the case, in terms of the four skills of listening, reading, writing and speaking but rather in terms of a better understanding of the new and indirectly of one's own culture.

On a broader scale, the need for standards was reflected by President Clinton in his 1997 State of the Union address, who although he did not talk about German or even foreign languages studies in general, nevertheless proposed some tests for the whole country as further evidence that the time for national standards has arrived in the United States. He proposed only two tests over the long span of years from kindergarten to 12th grade -- an English test in fourth grade and a mathematics test in eighth grade -- and recommended to spend $90 million for this project over the next five years. This is a minimal amount, actually a little more than the price of one F-22 fighter, but the fact is the President of the United States has broached the subject and it is now up to educators on all levels and in all subject areas to follow through. The President said that he was launching "a national crusade for educational standards -- not federal government standards, but

national standards, representing what all our students must know to succeed in the knowledge economy of the 21st century." (7)

The following day the heads of the two major teachers' union responded and issued their own calls for quality schools: the American Federation of Teachers (AFT), personified by the late President Albert Shanker, had been insisting on standards for years, the National Education Association (NEA), through its President Bob Chase, said that "too often, NEA has sat on the sidelines of change, naysaying, quick to say what won't work and slow to say what will [...]. The fact is, in some instances, we have used our power to block uncomfortable changes, to protect the narrow interest of our members, and not to advance the interests of students and schools." Chase stated further that his union in the past has been "too quick to dismiss the critics of public education and their ideas for change," and went on to say that henceforth "school quality -- the quality of the environment where students learn and where our members work -- must be our first responsibility." In the succeeding week , the non-partisan Public Agenda Foundation released a national survey of public high school students indicating that they too want by wide margins tougher standards in their schools. And just a few days ago, in the early days of April, the executives of over 200 major technological companies pledged at a White House meeting to use their influence to encourage educators to adopt voluntary national tests aimed at building a stronger educational system. In addition, Delaine Eastin, California's superintendent of public instruction also endorsed national standards. (8)

Once the new standards have been fully accepted, then *curricular* implementation becomes a major issue. How can these standards be put into practice? What needs to be done differently than in the past? From what has been said so far it follows that courses need to be restructured toward students' better understanding of their own culture but, more importantly, of the new culture. This means that we need to reorient our approach toward students. Primarily, we have to make a far greater effort to reach a larger number

of students; the days of a so-called traditional German curriculum, largely predicated on pedagogic principles and goals of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries are over. Elizabeth B. Bernhardt states it quite eloquently, "We are considered to be a profession of the elite, a profession that does not care about students outside the traditional [...] group. We have historically accepted only those most like ourselves. We must finally acknowledge the lack of morality behind this elitism. We must acknowledge that all students deserve a sequence of language study that makes sense, not just one that happens to be convenient[.]" for us. (9) In practical terms this requires acknowledging that students in this day and age are and have to be more concerned about future career possibilities, than has ever been the case before. They are, however, also just as interested in reading literature and in the arts in general as they have been in the past, because these disciplines show "culture's underlying value system, which includes characteristic habits of mind and prevalent assumptions about human nature and society." (10) Shoji Azuma's statement about curricular objectives for students of Japanese can be applied to students of all foreign languages, including German. In his own words, we need "[...]to educate students so that they function effectively in a contemporary global environment and so that they acquire a critical and comprehensive understanding of diverse cultures." (11)

The issue of articulation is one problem which has to be carefully studied and resolved in an effort to respond to current needs. Better articulation of middle and high school instruction, community colleges and full-fledged German programs at colleges and universities is required. But what does this term actually entail? Articulation is a word frequently used, usually stated as a pedagogic goal but not always carefully applied; it involves "the continuity of learning, the linkage of curriculum (goals, content, instruction, and assessment) within and across educational levels, and the integration of second languages and other academic contents; it also focuses on the progress of the individual learner within an educational-development framework." (12) The problem of articulation

for us on the post-secondary level frequently begins at the moment when we are expected to integrate and correctly place quite differently prepared incoming first-year students into the post-secondary curriculum. At that moment we find ourselves in a rather helpless position about how to accomplish this task because we cannot always differentiate between, what Leona LeBlanc and Carolyn Lally call, the "false beginners" and the "true beginners". "At most institutions only a handful of faculty feel that this transition is a seamless one" because we are lacking the proper placement instruments and because collaboration between the high schools and colleges is frequently poor. (13) And, of course, many times this predicament results in losing students for German and frequently for foreign language studies all together.

The reorientation of curriculum and methodology for the future has to prepare students better for the ever more integrated economies and shrinking size of the world, and has to increase an interest in foreign languages in general, and specifically in German. From a methodological point of view Bill VanPatten's method of communicative grammar instruction, based on the premise that acquisition must begin with comprehensible or "meaning-bearing" input, has to be taken more seriously. Students have to be able to "do something" with the input, i.e., complete surveys, play games, do true-false exercises, provide responses, ought to become more common practice. (14) Of course, all these exercises should be culturally based, and in addition, the concept of a reduced grammatical syllabus should become an integral and synchronized part of the German curriculum.

All this can be extended at any time to German courses by satellite TV, and the in-class room use of cyberspace such as German Internet/World Wide Net, and home pages. One paper at this year's meeting of the Institut für deutsche Sprache in Mannheim/Germany referred to this process as a transfer "Von der Druckstraße auf den Datenhighway". Schools and publishers have to use all these new technological devices in order to make language learning more effective. This will have the additional benefit that learning a

foreign language won't be seen by students as an old-fashioned process but rather as being on the cutting edge of technology. Such strategies and teaching devices, better than ever before, will help students realize that some seemingly self-evident concepts and principles may not be the same in other countries and thereby help them expand their cultural and intellectual horizons and their understanding of humanity at large.

Lastly, it appears that the time is ripe for innovative initiatives in the area of *testing*. In order to implement any new standards testing becomes a pivotal tool and how these tests should be formatted and their objectives needs to be postulated anew. Educators are in practically unanimous agreement that standards are meaningless unless backed by rigorous tests. Since outcomes, as we have seen earlier, are no longer stated and assessed in terms of the four skills a form of communicative testing has to be used more extensively. This means testing for use of the language in the real world, to be applied in actual situations as they occur in a cultural setting becomes mandatory. We cannot continue to teach a foreign language communicatively and then test students according to--in the meantime--old-fashioned criteria, since this is contradictory and counterproductive, and in general focuses students on learning how to answer and pass a specific type of examination instead of following a communicative continuum whereby cultural and sociological factors play an increasingly important role.

In conclusion, I want to reiterate that the pessimistic outlook expressed by some of our colleagues is misdirected and inappropriate. Instead, all of the mentioned factors can easily, as I have shown, be interpreted as the voice of our clientele demanding changes that are long due. In light of this understanding, and of the progress already started we can consider ourselves fortunate to be witnesses and participants of what could become a totally new age of foreign language teaching and learning.

ANMERKUNGEN

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